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UNCLAS GUATEMALA 001025

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: Vigilante Groups Taking Justice Into Their Own Hands

¶1. (U) Summary: The last several weeks have seen an uptick in violence spearheaded by Local

Citizen Security Groups (Juntas Locales de Seguridad Ciudadana). These groups, made up of armed civilians frustrated by the poor security situation and economic depression in their communities, are operating in rural departments such as Quiche, Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango, and Solola. The groups advocate vigilante justice and have acted out violently against police and suspected delinquents. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On November 16, a police officer was beaten to death in Chimaltenango for allegedly

trying to extort money from a bus driver. On November 27, in Solola, a large group of locals murdered three suspected extortionists who had allegedly killed a bus driver and passenger. The police in Solola initially resisted the group's attempts to recapture the three from police custody; however, the mob responded by setting three police cars and a motorcycle on fire. The police eventually abandoned their posts fearing for their safety and the three captured, including a 16-year old boy, were taken to a nearby park where they were covered in gasoline and burned alive.

¶3. (U) On December 4, three people were burned alive in Huehuetenango department. The

three were accused of decapitating an elderly woman whose body had been found in a mountainous area of the town. The police, who have not had a presence in the town since 2002 after locals killed one of the police officers, were not permitted to enter. However, local citizens invited the press to come and take pictures of the captives, noting how they apply their own brand of justice.

¶4. (U) On December 5, in Panajachel, a tourist town on Lake Atitlan, a man was beaten to

death for stealing 7000 Quetzales (USD 844) and the deed to the house of a local merchant. His three alleged female accomplices, one of whom was six months pregnant, were arrested and detained in the local police station. Locals later captured the women from police custody and set fire to four police vehicles and a gas station. The local police station and municipal building were also damaged. The police were eventually able to negotiate for the womens' release and dispersed the crowd using tear gas. On December 7, in Huehuetenango, a man accused of kidnapping had been taken hostage by the local population.

¶ 5. (SBU) Comment: There have been 111 cases of lynching so far in 2009, resulting in 45 dead

and 216 injured. As a comparison, there were only 8 reported lynching-related deaths in 2008. The increasingly dire economic situation coupled with extortion gangs infiltrating small towns and creating a previously non-existent crime problem has lead communities to organize themselves and exact justice. NGOs have expressed their concern for this issue but the government has not yet publicly condemned this behavior. Lynchings are likely to continue as local communities feel increased economic pressure, growing desperation over the deteriorating security situation in Guatemala, and especially given that the government seems unconcerned with this type of lawlessness. End Comment.

MCFARLAND